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ABSTRACT

This pilot study assessed the educational interests and needs of a group of older, low-literate adults with the eventual goal of developing computer-assisted literacy programs specifically designed for older adults. Subjects, 10 women and 1 man aged 60 to over 80 years who were members of a center for older adults and who were already working with tutors to improve their reading skills, completed a questionnaire and engaged in a structured interview. Results indicated that (1) the subjects exhibited a wide variety of skill levels and had diverse needs; (2) a majority had basic decoding skills and wanted to develop higher-order skills; (3) many expressed interest in reading materials related to leisure interests; (4) most usually read a wide variety of materials at some level; (5) their writing needs were taken care of by others close to them; (6) the majority of subjects expressed a desire for self-improvement and self-sufficiency; and (7) the tutor's role was crucial in providing motivation and encouragement. (The survey instrument and the explanation of the study--which was read to the subjects--are attached.) (RS)

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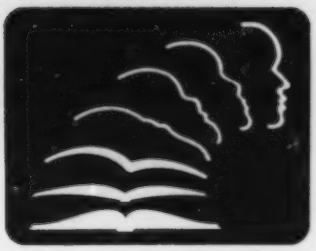

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF ADULT LITERACY

ASSESSING THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN A READING PROGRAM AT A CENTER FOR OLDER ADULTS

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ASSESSING THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN A READING PROGRAM AT A CENTER FOR OLDER ADULTS

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Assessing the Educational Needs and Interests of Students Enrolled in a Reading Program at a Center for Older Adults

Introduction

Older Americans are one of the groups to suffer from the problems associated with inadequate literacy skills. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1985) reports that approximately 4.2 million older adults (60-65 years of age) are not functionally literate. This represents 35% of this age group - the largest percentage for any age group. Although there are no firm statistics on the literacy levels of adults over the age of 65, it can be assumed that the percentage of adults in this age group who are not functionally literate is at least 35% and probably higher.

Most of the literacy programs targeted to older adults are geared toward networking with current agencies of adult basic education and advocacy for literacy needs among the aging rather than toward delivery of services. The National Council on Aging has developed the Literacy Education for the Elderly Project which demonstrates new methods of providing literacy services to older adults by linking community-based organizations with volunteer literacy providers. These projects are increasing awareness of the problem of illiteracy and increasing the level of availability of literacy services to older adults.

Computer-assisted instruction has many advantages that make it particularly appropriate for use with adult students (Martin, 1982;

Vacc, 1984). It has the capability of individualizing instruction; this is beneficial for use with adult students since adult learners, more so than children, tend to have unique educational backgrounds and needs. Less can be assumed about the prior knowledge of the adult learner than can be assumed about the prior knowledge of the child. Computer-assisted instruction also has the advantage of presenting instruction in a way that is new for many adults, and therefore does not remind them of the traditional school settings that most likely failed them as children. Although there is evidence to support the effectiveness of using computer-assisted instruction with older adults (Furlong & Kearsley, 1986) no computer-based literacy programs have been developed to serve the needs and interests unique to an older, low-literate population. The purpose of the pilot study discussed in this paper was to assess the educational needs and interests of a group of older, low-literate adults. The information gathered in this pilot study will eventually be used to develop other studies which will assess older adults' educational needs and interests and will be used to develop a computer-assisted literacy program designed specifically for older adults.

A survey of some of the available research revealed that studies which have assessed educational needs and interests of older adults have typically used individual or group interviews or checklists (Fisher, 1986; Kasworm, 1972; LeClerc, 1985). A structured interview with open-ended questions was thought to be appropriate for use with the individuals at the Center in the Park.

Since all but one of the participants were female, the pronoun "she" will be used when referring to all participants in order to keep the participants' identities anonymous.

Method

Subjects

Eleven adults who are members of the Center in the Park, a center for older adults located in Philadelphia, PA, participated in the study. All participants had previously expressed a desire to improve their reading skills and had been assigned a tutor to work on reading skills at the Center. Ten of the participants were women. All were over sixty years of age; two were between 60 and 64; two were 65 to 69; two were 70 to 74; two were 75 to 79; and three were 80 years of age or older. Nine were Black, one was White, and one was Hispanic. Nine of the eleven considered themselves to be in good health. Five of the eleven (45%) have completed less than four years of schooling; three (27%) have completed five to eight years of schooling; two have completed nine to eleven years of schooling; and one graduated from high school in another (non-English-speaking) country.

Materials

A questionnaire assessing educational needs and interests was developed to provide a basis for structured interviews with each

participant. A copy of this questionnaire can be found in the Appendix. It included sections on demographic data, the reading class at the Center, leisure activities, and interest in using the computer in reading class. It also included sections which assessed subjects' current reading and writing needs and interests and potential reading and writing interests. Each interview was audiotaped with the subject's knowledge and consent.

Procedure

Each participant met individually with the researcher in a quiet room at the Center. Before the interview began the researcher read the Explanation of the Study to the participant (see Appendix) and answered any questions the participant had about the study. The researcher also asked the participant's permission to audiotape the interview; no participant refused to have his or her interview recorded. The interviews took an average of thirty minutes to complete. At the completion of questioning participants were thanked and dismissed.

Results

The Reading Class at the Center

Many participants gave multiple reasons for joining the reading class. Reasons mentioned by two participants each were "wants to improve reading"; "tutor is a good friend"; and "wants

to learn more". Other reasons (mentioned one time each) included: wanted to read by self; wants to improve writing; a friend's success inspired the person to do it; wanted to join Bible class and thought reading class would help; wanted to go to school; wants to print better; heard in the news that many people can't read and was inspired by others' stories; class was convenient; person at the Center told the participant that the class was available; reading seemed complicated and she wanted to learn more about it; and wanted to regain skills lost after an operation.

When asked what they would tell a friend about the reading class, the most popular answers were "likes learning" (three individuals mentioned this) and "likes class" (3). Other answers included that the class "is a good place to learn" (2); that the participant "likes the tutor" (2); and that "I'm succeeding" (1) or that "I know more/understand more about reading" (1).

When asked what they liked best about meeting with their tutors, many participants (6) answered that the tutor was a friend of theirs. Other answers related to the tutor as well: the tutor is patient; the tutor is positive; the tutor praises the student; the tutor takes time with the student; and tutor keeps the student on track (one answer each). One student liked the one-to-one exchange with the tutor; two liked the work they do in the class; one said that progress felt good while one said that she could now explain reading materials by herself.

The desire to improve oneself and the desire for personal contact and friendship seem to be two themes that recurred throughout the interviews. A third, but less prominent, theme was the desire for independence in reading. However, it could not be

determined from this part of the interview whether this desire for improvement related to needs or interests of the participants.

Materials Currently Read By Participants

The most popular item mentioned when participants were asked what they currently read is the Bible (10 included this in their answers). The second most popular items were the newspaper (6) and magazines (5) including *Modern Maturity*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ebony*, the *Daily Word* and those in the Center's reading room. Three read materials related to hobbies (such as a puzzlebook, materials about plants, and an exercise book). Four people mentioned lessons from their class. Three read stories. Some other answers (each mentioned one time) include: Sunday School lessons; letters; the Center in the Park Newsletter; materials at work (a calendar); a church bulletin; and stories to grandchildren.

The participants currently read a wide variety of materials at some level. It is also interesting to note that most of the materials mentioned are for leisure reading, although this was not prompted in the question.

Materials Participants Need to Read

Participants were asked what types of materials they must read to get by in their daily lives. No distinction was made between whether these materials are read now or whether they are counted among items that the participant would like to become more

proficient at reading. Some participants, however, made this distinction spontaneously during their interviews and these instances will be noted. Nine participants said that they need to read prescriptions; four can read them, two get help when reading them, and two have trouble reading them. Eight need to read ingredients on packaging; seven individuals can read all or some of these materials, while one would like to be able to read them. Seven said they need to be able to read directions on packaging; all seven said they can read all or some of these types of materials. Six said that advertisements are required reading for them; four have no problems reading them, one can read them with help and one said that she does not currently read them because she needs help. One person mentioned, and can read, coupons. Seven participants said they need to read bills (such as the phone bill or electric bill); two mentioned that they have no problems reading such bills. Seven also mentioned that they need to use the phone book regularly; four said they can use it with no problems, one said she can use it somewhat, and one said that she needs help when using it. Six participants said they often need to read bus, subway or street signs; all said they can read some or all of the street signs they must read. Five participants mentioned forms; two said they have no problems with forms; two say they get help when they have forms to fill out; and one said she cannot fill out forms. One person mentioned car insurance; one mentioned Medicare, Blue Cross and Blue Shield materials (which she has help with when reading).

It was clear from these results that the participants have few problems reading many materials they are faced with daily, such as

packaging, advertisements, bus, subway and street signs, or the phone book. Some said that they could get by quite easily without having to use these materials; for example one woman said that she never bought any cleaning supplies that she could not read. The participants do seem to have some problems with specialized items, such as prescriptions, and perhaps bills. They also often mentioned that they get help when reading many of these materials. It seems that the majority of the participants have worked out ways of dealing with these reading needs so that they cause few problems.

Materials Participants Would Like to Read

The most popular material that participants would like to read (but don't read now) was magazines (5), including newsmagazines, *Ebony*, *Reader's Digest*, *Modern Maturity*, *The Upper Room* (a religious magazine) and the magazines in the Center's Reading Room. Three expressed an interest in reading stories; three also want to be able to read more of the Bible or read it better. Two would like to read the newspaper. Two would like to read stories to their grandchildren. One would like to read library books; another mentioned letters. One would like to read bus and train station signs. One would like to do work-related reading; two would like to read about how to get a job. Seven would like to read materials related to leisure-time interests (three would like to read about entertainment personalities; one person each mentioned that they would be interested in reading about doing volunteer work, history, current events, and gardening).

It is important to note the mention of materials such as the Bible and religious magazines, and magazines such as *Modern Maturity* and *Ebony*; these materials were also mentioned by some participants as materials they read now. Materials relating to leisure-time interests were also mentioned by participants as some they would like to read. The Bible, magazines and materials relating to leisure-time interests may be particularly attractive to older adults.

Writing Needs Among Participants

Perceived Writing Skills. Participant were asked if they would like to write better than they do now. Eight answered yes; two answered no (a response from one individual was missing). When asked if writing better would help them, eight said yes and two said no. Six gave no specific reason why writing better would help them; one said she would like to fill out forms, while one said she would like to write a book about her experiences.

Need To Write. Only one person said that she often has need to write. Five said they do not need to write, because they have someone to help them with writing-related chores. Five did not clearly communicate whether or not they need to write much; for example, they would list specific types of things they need to write, but did not say how frequently they had to write them. When asked what they need to write, five said they need to fill out forms (two said they can do these, one said she needs help doing them and one said she has help doing them). One person mentioned

checks, which she can fill out, while one mentioned bills, which she can take care of.

Materials Participants Desire to Write. The question about what types of things participants want to write probably best indicated what they cannot write and would like to be able to write on their own. The most frequently mentioned item was letters (six individuals mentioned them) followed by checks (two people indicated a desire to write checks.) One person each mentioned forms, postcards, stories, a journal, and punctuation.

Summary. The results of this section of the questionnaire seem to indicate that the participants do not have much need to write. Most seem to have someone else they rely on to take care of their writing needs. They would like to write for personal reasons. Some wish to assume responsibility for their writing needs, probably to become more self-sufficient; however, these are not needs as much as an avenue toward greater independence.

Help With Reading and Writing

The people in the study were asked if they have someone who helps them when they have a problem with reading or writing. Only one person out of eleven said that she never needs help. Often, the individual mentioned more than one person who helps her. The tutor was mentioned by five participants as someone who helps them. A daughter or son was mentioned by four participants; a sister and

a neighbor by two participants each, and pastor, nephew and wife by one participant each.

Leisure-time Activities of Participants

When asked what they do in their free time, five participants each answered sewing, crocheting, listening to the news on the radio, spending time with friends, and spending time with family. Four answered that they like to garden; three answered that they do volunteer work while another three answered that they listen to music on the radio. Two answered that they like to cook in their spare time; two also mentioned reading. One participant each answered that they enjoy bingo, cleaning, working around the house, attending church, travelling, and being active in or following politics. One person said that she listens to records that teach her how to read, while another said that she attends another reading class.

Watching television was another popular leisure-time activity of participants. Ten of eleven mentioned that they watch television. Four claim to watch five or more hours daily, one claimed to watch four hours daily; three claim to watch three hours daily; while one person claimed to watch two hours or one hour or less, respectively. The most popular category of programs was situation-comedy, which seven claimed to watch frequently. Six said they enjoy watching the news and six also mentioned talk shows. Game shows were the third most frequently mentioned viewing choice; five participants said they enjoyed game shows. Three enjoy daytime dramas and three enjoy news programs. Two mentioned

police stories, while two also mentioned sports programs. One person mentioned dramas, while one person mentioned watching a televised reading program.

Participants were also asked to name any other classes offered at the Center that they are active in. Six said they are or have been active in at least one class; five said they are not active in any classes. Three mentioned the Bible class, two mentioned the exercise class, two mentioned the sewing class, and one each mentioned the crochet class, the macrame class, and the bowling class. Reasons given for not participating in some of the other classes included: they involve too much walking; transportation is too difficult; the person did not want to attend class alone; the person has no time due to working; money is a problem; the individual wanted more advanced classes than were offered; and one individual said she had never had the flier which explains the classes read to her. Two said they were simply not interested in the offerings.

Television appears to be a major source which the participants turn to for information and entertainment. There is much apparent interest among the participants in broadening their horizons, however. The results of this section should be noted carefully because participants mentioned that they would like to read about their leisure-time activities.

Interest In Using The Computer In Reading Class

Finally, participants were asked two questions related to the computer. First, they were asked if they had ever used a computer

before; ten said they had not, while one had. When asked if they thought they would like to use a computer to help them read and write, nine said they would while two (both 80 years of age or older) said they were not sure. None of the participants replied that they definitely would not be interested in using the computer.

Other Findings

During the course of the interview, several participants made interesting comments regarding things they would like to learn. One individual mentioned that she would like to learn to type; two mentioned that they would like to learn to spell. One mentioned that she would like to learn the correct pronunciation of words. Finally, one participant said that she is interested in increasing her understanding of what she reads.

Discussion

The participants interviewed in this study are at a wide variety of skill levels and have diverse needs. The participants range from those who need basic decoding skills to those who are interested in increasing their understanding of what they read to those who have learned English as a second language and mainly want to increase their vocabularies. The majority of the individuals apparently need higher-level skills, however; most have basic decoding skills but want to increase the variety of materials they read and their understanding of the materials that they read.

Many of the adults expressed interest in materials such as the Bible, magazines, the newspaper and materials related to leisure interests. These were mentioned by the participants as materials they either read now or would enjoy reading, regardless of their age or skill level. These findings may generalize to other groups of urban adults.

There are some aspects that are common to all participants. Except for those with the most limited skills, they currently read a wide variety of materials at some level. Most can handle their daily reading needs, either by themselves, by getting help or by avoiding materials that give them problems. For many of them, current reading is for pleasure and the materials that many read now and others indicate that they would like to read are similar (the Bible, religious magazines, *Ebony*, and *Modern Maturity*). The popularity of these types of materials indicate that these learners need to develop a sophisticated vocabulary to deal with the materials that interest them (the Bible and the magazines, for example). They do have some specialized learning needs that should be noted; for example, many mentioned prescriptions and utility bills as items that they need to read but have difficulty with. These reading materials also require a specialized, high-level vocabulary.

The participants' writing needs, for the most part, are taken care of by others close to them. Again, they write mainly for pleasure. Often this writing or desire to write is seen as a form of self-expression; many either currently write or wish to write letters, stories, or journals.

The majority of the participants indicated indirecty through their answers that they would like to become more self-sufficient. Even though they have support networks to rely on, they are interested in becoming independent of these structures to some extent. They seemed to indicate that they want to broaden their horizons if they can do it without jeopardizing the safety provided by their support networks. This came through in the reasons they gave for attending class; for example one woman said she wanted to understand her reading without having to ask anyone for help. It especially came through in their desire to improve their writing; apparently, they want to write checks (for example) if they can; if, for some reason, they can't, there is someone who will take care of it for them. Mainly they want to write for relaxation.

Many participants have a desire for self-improvement. This came through often in their reasons for joining the reading class; to learn, to read better, and to write better were answers frequently given. They also desire to be informed and entertained; most turn to television for this purpose, while about half take advantage of the classes offered at the Center. Many seem to view reading as a way to expand their horizons, and if they could improve their reading they would use it to do so.

Personal contact is very important to these learners, and is one of the factors they currently enjoy most about the reading class. The tutor's role is crucial in providing motivation and encouragement. Perhaps these learners need a trusted friend that they can rely on to feel secure in a learning situation.

The adults interviewed at the Center in the Park seem to have a variety of educational interests but few real educational needs.

The needs and interests they do have could be incorporated into a reading program in the following ways. The program could use some more realistic materials, for example materials related to needs (such as prescriptions or bills), as starting points for the lessons. Materials related to educational interests could be incorporated as well (for example using text from the Bible or a story from a magazine). Television or the computer could be used as media to present lessons; however, these should not be used without a tutor that the learner respects and trusts and has ample time to work with in a one-to-one situation. The lessons could also incorporate vocabulary work and a writing component (allowing the learners to write their own stories or write about their own experiences). The learners should be able to choose what they will do during their lessons.

Principal Investigator's Future Research Plan

The investigator will continue to submit proposals to various sources of external funding which will incorporate research done in this area. The Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy is interested in developing computer software, targeted to older learners, to be used in literacy programs for these learners. The Institute will continue to submit proposals for such a project to agencies that fund projects targeted to older Americans (the Institute on Aging, for example, could potentially be interested in such a project) as well as the many agencies that fund literacy projects targeted to starting new types of delivery services or

projects using technology to deliver literacy services. As the software is developed, a larger group of older adults will be surveyed to determine their educational needs and interests. As the information gathered paints a clearer picture of the needs and interests of this group, these needs and interests would be incorporated in the software. The research described in this paper would serve as a pilot study for these future endeavors.

APPENDIX

Gerontology Center Project Questionnaire
*indented items may be used as prompts

1. Sex:
   A. Male
   B. Female

2. Age:
   A. 60-64
   B. 65-69
   C. 70-74
   D. 75-79
   E. 80 or above

3. Race:
   A. Black
   B. White
   C. Hispanic
   D. Other

4. Last grade completed in school:
   A. 0-4
   B. 5-8
   C. 9-11
   D. High school graduate
   E. Other

5. Do you consider yourself to be in good health?
   A. Yes
   B. No

6. Why did you decide to join the reading class?

7. What would you tell a friend about the reading class?

8. What do you like best about meeting with your tutor?

9. What kinds of things do you read now?

10. What things would you like to read?

    Newspapers?
    Bible or religious books?
    Magazines (like Reader's Digest or Modern Maturity)?
    Novels?
    Children's books (to children)?

11. Are there any things that you need to read? Can you tell me what some of those things are? There's alot of things I need to read, like:
    Forms (including insurance forms, tax forms, job applications, forms in the doctor's office)
    Prescriptions/names of medications
    Ingredients on packages of food
    Directions on products (like cleaning supplies or packages of food)
    Ads/Grocery ads
    Bus, subway, street signs

Maps
Phone book
Emergency information
Calendar

12. Would you like to write better than you do now? Would it help you to write better? Why?

13. What types of things do you want to write?

14. Do you need to write often? What kinds of things do you have to write? I have to write grocery lists, how about you? When I go to the doctor's office, there are always some forms that have to be filled out.

    How about letters to utility company, landlord, etc.?

15. What do you like to do in your free time when you are not at the Center?

    Watching T.V.? Which programs? How much T.V. do you watch every day?
    A. 1 hour or less
    B. 2 hours
    C. 3 hours
    D. 4 hours
    E. 5 hours or more

    Hobbies?
    Spending time with friends or family?
    Volunteer work?
    Listen to news or music on the radio?

16. Would you like to read about these things?

17. Can you think of anything else we have not talked about that you would like to read about?

18. Do you have grandchildren that you look after? Do you/would you like to read to them?

19. Do you have a part-time job? Would you like to get a job?

20. I know that there are lots of classes offered here at the Center. Do you go to any of them? Which ones? Why do you like to go to those classes? or, What don't you go to the classes?

21. When I have problems reading or writing something, I ask a friend at work or at home to help me. Is there anyone besides your tutor who you sometimes ask for help when you have a problem with reading or writing?

22. Have you ever used a computer? How would you feel about learning to use one?

23. Do you think learning to read and write on a computer would be interesting?

Explanation of the Study
(To be read aloud to subjects)

I'd like to thank you for coming down to talk to me today. What I would like to do is ask you some questions about your reading sessions with your tutor, and about some of the things you would be interested in reading about while you are having your sessions. Remember that if you get tired or decide that you do not want to answer any more questions, we can stop at any time. Answering the questions is voluntary. Also, no one but me will know how you answer the questions. Your answers will remain anonymous. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?

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